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AN
OLD MAN-OF-WAR'S-MAN'S YARN.

Dedicated (by kind permission) to

CHARLES DICKENS, ESQ.,

By Richard Heathcote Gooch.

Patron :

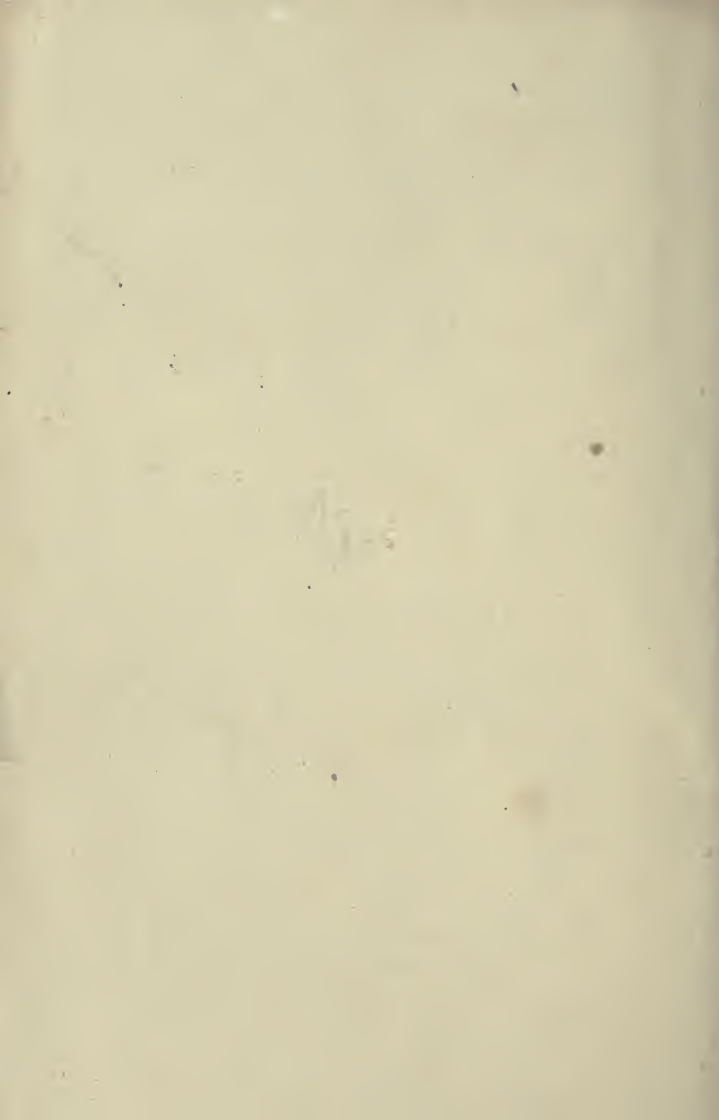
HIS GRACE THE DUKE OF ARGYLL, K.T.

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FROM

E. M. RICHFORD,
Stationer,
St. Lawrence.





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Old Man-of-War's-Man's Yarn.

DEDICATED (BY KIND PERMISSION) TO

CHARLES DICKENS, ESQ.,

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Patron :

His Grace the DUKE OF ARGYLL, K.T.

AN ACTUAL INCIDENT (NEVER BEFORE NARRATED) OF
THE EXPEDITION OF THE LATE

SIR JOHN FRANKLIN.

WITH


Reminiscences of Eighteen Hundred and War Time.

ENTERED AT STATIONERS' HALL.

LONDON:

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P R E F A C E.



IT has occurred to me that my readers—presuming I have any—would, to a certain extent, feel interested in the *facts* of this story: they may be informed in a few words. I was returning one afternoon, some fifteen years ago, from bathing, at a place called Dumpton, near Ramsgate, when, as I approached the East Cliff, I fell in with an old man sitting by the wayside offering pipe-lights for sale. He gave me “Good-day” as I came up, and we entered into conversation. He told me (I afterwards ascertained every particular was true) that he was nearly ninety years of age, that he had been fifty years afloat, that he had two sons in the *Erebus* with Sir John Franklin, that their half-pay had been stopped on the presumption of their being dead, and that they had not been heard of for years. I left him in a few minutes with

the remark, that I supposed, like myself, he was going home to dinner ; he replied that he had no dinner to go to, or words to that effect. On reaching home I sent a dinner to the poor old fellow. In return he sent me his blessing ! To the best of my recollection I never saw him again ; the rest of my story is simply fiction.

I think I cannot close these remarks better than by thanking (as I do most sincerely) the gentlemen who have so kindly lent the influence of their distinguished names to the title-page of my unworthy book.

R. H. G.

London, January, 1870.



AN

Old Man-of-War's-Man's Yarn.

WE usually sojourn at Shinglebeach in July—we have done so for years past—invariably starting with the idea that once in such a quiet out-of-the-way place, we should do more work than in town. Delusion! Not that we would have any one suppose for a moment that we have no ground for complimenting ourselves on our assiduity while there, it having amounted to actual bewilderment before now to particularise the way in which we have spent (not to say wasted) so long as five or six weeks, so fully were we employed; though we confess (and we do so with shame) that an investi-

gation has too often ended in the discovery that the aforesaid assiduity consisted mainly in reading, lounging, smoking, throwing a stick into the water, for the sole amusement, of course, of our eager, panting friend "Rover," and, on an average, falling in love with some well-shapen pair of ankles or other three times a week. Profitable!

We remember some years since, when the heads of this story were first indited, and when, indeed, we had little idea that it would ever be dignified with an appearance in print, that we were lying on the beach, with our elbows in the sand, when our attention was arrested by hearing—

"Would your honour please to buy a few pipe-lights of a poor old sailor?"

We were meditating at the time upon the futility of most human aims—were contemplating, as the golden rays of the departing sun danced merrily upon the advancing tide, how gloriously, like the

close of a good life, the day was waning, when the appeal to our charity, made in a feeble, tremulous voice, aroused us to the realities around. Looking up, we beheld a very old man ; so old, indeed, that it seemed the most far-fetched idea imaginable for him to suppose that he need to proclaim the fact, and who, raising his palsied hand to where his forelock had been within the last forty years or so, repeated his question—

“ Would your honour please to buy a few pipe-lights of a poor old sailor ? ”

Purchasing our old friend's stock off hand, which amounted to some such sum as threepence, we inquired of him his age, and whether he managed to obtain a livelihood by selling pipe-lights.

“ Ah ! may heaven preserve your honour as long,” the poor old fellow replied ; “ but I'm ninety year old come the 10th of next month, and I am thankful to God he has spared me till now ! ”

"You say you are an old sailor?" we struck in; "were you in the merchant service or the navy?"

"Both, your honour; both," he replied; "first, I traded off and on to the East for about ten year, and then, God bless her" (the old man reverently inclined his head), "I joined Her Majesty's Royal Navy, where I served nigh forty year, till I was pensioned off with tenpence a day."

Expressing our surprise at the smallness of the sum for so long a period of service, we hinted to the old man that, were it quite agreeable to him, we should like to know more about him, whether he had a partner or children living to cheer him in his decline of life.

"May God bless your honour," he replied, and we thought the stick he was leaning on seemed to shake a little as he spoke; "with as good a pardner as my old mate was to me, for more than fifty year; but she's gone, your honour—gone to

God's mercy five year-ago ; and as for our two poor boys,* may heaven forefend, your honour, such sorrow as mine, but in '45 they sailed with Sir John Franklin, and have never been heard on ! We hoped and hoped, on and on, month after month, year after year, me and my poor missus, sitting by our bit o' fire a winters' nights, thinking how cold it must be with our poor lads in them Artic seas, and a wishing they was with us, or, at least, to hear of 'em, when one day the postman come with a great big letter, and my poor old pardner, who was doing a bit o' washing, ups and runs to the door like a child, and comes to me, for she couldn't read, and says, ' Tom ! Tom, old man, here's a letter from our boys ! I'm sure it's from our boys, Tom ! ' and the poor old creature, God rest her soul, seemed just like out of her mind, and was a fit to cry till it was read to her, your honour, and then she fell like all of heap ;

* John and Thomas Hartnell, able seamen—ship, *Erebus*.

and, God be merciful" (the old man inclined his head as he spoke) "she died soon arter. For you see, your honour, we as a old neighbour in as has glasses, and he reads as how it warn't from our boys at all, but from the Admiralty, to say that as they hadn't a heard nothing of our lads for so long, they must conclude as they was lost; and, consequently, 'My Lords' should stop our poor boys' half-pay, which, God bless 'em! dead or alive yet—and I still has hopes, your honour—they'd left at home to purwidge for their poor old father and mother.

"And I do thinks," continued the poor old fellow; "and, by the way, others have both thought and said so too, pretty strongly, that it was rather sharp upon us poor folk for them to take our boys' money away *afore they know'd* as they was gone. And now your honour sees what a poor lone man I am, though I dare say there be thousands worse off; still, your

honour, tenpence a day aint much, and that's why I took to selling pipe-lights. But I don't complain, your honour; for when the warrant shall come" (he spoke, though in sea terms, reverently, with his hands clasped, of the decree of death) "may my poor blessing rest on my poor lads, if as how they needs it; and if not, why I goes to join 'em, and that's my consolation—that's my consolation, your honour."

Finding the poor old fellow was quite overcome with the recollection of his misfortunes, we endeavoured, as far as it lay in our power, to assuage the old man's grief, and promising to institute inquiries for him on our return to town, walked with him to his cottage hard by.

Next morning, having breakfasted, lit our pipe, and undergone that most invigorating of processes, a "dip" in the sea, we determined upon visiting the old man, first purchasing a few such trifles ('bacca included) as we thought would be accept-

able to him. Presenting ourselves at his door, our venerable friend seemed not only pleased, but delighted to see us; and begging us to be seated, drew our attention to a very fine model of a sixty-gun frigate (the original long since gone to Davy Jones's locker) in which he had served, he said, many years, and seen some rough service.

An ardent young spirit of ours, of the mature age of a dozen years or so—and who at such a period of existence has not felt themselves fearless alike of the din of war and the perils of the sea?—evincing a great desire to hear some of the details—in other words, a yarn—of the old tar's career, we suggested to him that it might cool our young friend's ardour a bit if he were to narrate some of the misfortunes incidental to such a profession.

“Well, young gentleman,” he began, “and when he gets aboard, your honour, may he allus make ‘friends forrard,’ for

they do say, 'aft the most honour, forrard the better man,' which is as true a saying as that Mother Carey's chickens is a sign o' wind, or that ill-luck attends them as puts to sea o' Fridays. Howsomever, in regard, though, o' being cast away, your honour, and which happened in '5, in the old *Blazer* o' sixty guns and 600 men, it were somewheres about the end of November, when one day, as we was a lying at Spithead, the shore-boats (or 'bum-boats,' as they're call'd) brings off news about a great fight as had took place, and as how Lord Nelson had lick'd the French holler! I know it were about that time, your honour, 'cause my missus was in dock with our first, which took place aboard quite unexpected, and it were 'heave and pall' with me that I warn't disrated for letting her come aboard. Well, your honour, by rights we was to have got the anchor with the night tide, bound away, with seal'd orders, nobody know'd where,

when somehow, just as the news gets aboard about the fight, and about Lord Nelson being kill'd, off comes orders from the port admiral to 'dowse' the blue-peter (haul it down), for that we warn't to sail.

"Well, next day and for days arter, nothing was talk'd of but Lord Nelson and the wictory o' Trafalgar, and how some would have give—ah! both legs, to have been in it, particularly when they heard as Lord Nelson had been kill'd; for the men didn't believe there was a *Johnny Crapeau* as would dare do it. Well, there we lay for some days, with lots o' liberty ashore, which nobody didn't want, cos they'd spent their advance afore, till one day we see'd signals as Lord Nelson's body was expected, and arter that we guess'd we was to sail. Well, about the middle o' the day, your honour, we sees the *Wictory*, as has him aboard, coming in with her ensign half-masted, and a firing minute guns; and o' course we

and all the other ships does the same; and I do hopes you believe me, your honour, when I says that I don't think there was a man in the ship as didn't feel as if he was a 'busting' with grief when he see'd that wessel a coming in firing them dismal guns! I see some of our chaps, big hardy fellows, as would a faced a lion, turn to and blubber like gals—men as I know would a been glad o' the chance o' shoving their own figure-heads under the enemy's cutlass, as Jack Sykes* did, sooner than a hair o' the admiral's head should a been hurt; and then to see him being towed into Spithead a sheer hulk like! It was too much for 'em, your honour. It was lucky for them *Johnny Crapeaus* as the war was over; if that fight had had to come over again, I don't believe our people would a took a single prize! Not

* Twice saved Nelson's life, parrying blows, and at last actually interposed his own head to receive the full force of a Spanish sabre.—*Southey's "Life of Nelson."*

as I 'means as they couldn't, your honour, but they was that mad with grief and rage, I believe they would have sunk or blowed up every Frenchman on the sea. Why, he was that belov'd, was Lord Nelson, your honour, that several men as couldn't get leave was drown'd trying to swim ashore in the night to go to his funeral; and I know'd two as walk'd all the way to London to see him stow'd away in SIR Paul's, though they know'd, by the 'Articles o' War,' as it was death or three dozen for going without leave.

"Well, but your honour, in regard though a losing o' the ship, and sailing on onlucky days. We gets the anchor, one Friday about noon, with just a capful o' wind from the southard; though it was precious heavy, the anchor seem'd to 'come home,' and the first on the rope didn't sing his best as we brought it to the cathead. Ay, even 'mong the officers, too, there was a goodish deal o' oneasiness, for I heard one

on 'em tell the first lufftenant as he wish'd the captain had sail'd any other day; which the first lufftenant smiles at, and said he wish'd so to, but that orders must be obey'd; and so tells the boatswain to 'splice the main-brace' (pipe to grog), as the cheeryest way, I 'sposes, o' getting them notions out o' the men's heads. Well, your honour, it might be two or three days arter, and we was a getting well down channel, when it comes on to blow hard, and the sea 'like mountains rolling,' as the song says, right in our teeth. Well, it might be close upon six bells, in the middle watch (three o'clock in the morning), and I'd been on deck since midnight in a pelt-ing rain, with the wind a worse, if any-thing, when just as I was a hoping as they wouldn't call 'all hands,' and keep me out of my watch below, a messmate o' mine, as has wery sharp eyes, comes up to me and swears he can see breakers! Well, we was both a-holding on to the weather

side o' the poop, when our second luff, as has the watch, hears him, and says, 'What's that, my man, what's that?' and the man ups and points right away on the weather bow; and there, sure enough, the officer see with his glass sufficient to make him leave the deck and call the captain and first lufftenant.

"Well, by this time it was clear as could be that something was wrong; for the captain walks aft to the binnacle to see how her head lay, the moment he come on deck, while the first lufftenant gives orders to 'beat to quarters,' and to 'bout ship.' Well, your honour, in the beating to quarters I goes to my station, which was on the larboard side the quarter deck, when a flash o' lightning as seem'd to strike every man in the ship, it was so little expected, shows us the land right ahead, and a ridge o' breakers all round! Well, with the lightning flashes into my mind about sailing o' Friday, and how we was all sure

to be lost ; and sartinly nothing look'd more likely. Well, we was just a bracing round the yards, trying for to wear her off, when I was pitch'd clean off my feet, and stunn'd agen the breech of a gun. How I come to I never know'd, but as soon as I did, I runs for it on to the poop, as it was clear the ship was ashore, and the masts was a going by the board ! Well, your honour, as soon as I could manage it, I crawls over to windward, where, sure enough, I sees what I thought was the last moments of us all, and what made brave men serious as was never so afore. The sea come boiling up and rushing at us like ten thousand furies broke loose, every moment lifting the ship higher on the rocks, and a washing away my onfortunate shipmates by scores ! Well, your honour, the captain, the first lufftenant, and two midshipmen was kill'd right alongside o' me by the wreck o' the masts ; for in ten minutes arter she struck there warn't a

stick left standing in her 'cept the foremast and foretop, with a few poor souls clinging to it. How long it seemed, or what we thought of or endured the hours that pass'd till day broke, I'm thankful to God he's a'most forbade me the recollection on ; all as I remembers now, your honour, is, that stiff with the cold and a holding on 'for dear life,' I finds myself afloat on a piece of the wreck, with a man o' the name o' Grummet, as is at Greenwich now, and as they calls 'Old' Grummet, though he warn't above thirty year old when we was saved by a French fishing-boat. For you see, your honour, the wind moderated in the morning, and our firing guns when we struck brought out the fishermen for what they could get, which warn't much 'cept us two out o' 600 poor souls as the sun went down upon !

“ One poor man as stood it out by me till it was just a getting light, and was the last o' our lot as was wash'd away, gives me a

'bacca-box, which he said if I was saved (for he, he said, couldn't hold out much longer), he hoped I would give his wife, as she give it to him when they was a sweethearting, which would show her, he said, as he was a thinking of her and their two little ones. He was a good shipmate, your honour, was poor Will, and a smart sailor—gentle as a woman in the 'sick bay,' and for pluck was as true as steel! When I found him gone, I thought it was all over with me. I didn't see him go; the sea broke over us three or four foot deep, your honour, every now and then; once, when I had a'most lost my breath, I look'd for him, but he was gone, poor man! O' course, your honour, I give his wife the box, though it warn't till some time arter, and she was in widder's weeds; but, poor creature, she did take on so when I give it her. First she snatches at it, and didn't seem to believe her eyes, and then she falls to a crying and a screeching, and

then a crying agen, till I feels quite sorry as I said anything about it. Howsomer, she soon seem'd to forget both her grief and poor Will, for about six months arter she marries a man as was lost in the *Spanker* frigate, who, they did say, used to 'light her about a bit' with a rope lantern — rope's end her, I mean, your honour."

Observing a scar on the side of the old fellow's head, we thought it a good opportunity for directing his observations to other events in his life; and so questioned him respecting it. Did he receive such a decoration at the hands of the enemy, and so forth?

"Oh! ah! your honour, in a 'cutting out' job in the port o' T——. I was sent away one night in the first cutter—there was three boats in all, one for each bow and one for the most likely place as we could find for boarding. The prize were a fine French sloop o' war, o' eighteen guns

and two hundred men. The night warn't neither dark nor light, but middling like, with a kind o' scud every now and then between us and the moon. We waited some hours in the shade o' a kind o' promontory, till we see the lights out in the town, and so close to the enemy that we could hear the Frenchmen's laughing and singing quite plain brought out to us upon the night wind. Howsomever, it might be somewheres nigh four bells (two o'clock in the morning) when our first 'luff' passes the word for 'out oars,' which, in course, was muffled; and to move like cats up to the starboard main-chains o' the prize, the other boats taking each bow, and cutting her cable. Well, there she lay, looming rather large for fifty blue jackets and twenty jollies (marines) to take; but, Lord bless your honour, we had made up our minds to have her, and have her we did, though we was rather oneasy lest the moon should break out, and discover us in

time for her grape and canister shot to tell. Well, presently we gets close to, and at that moment a voice holloas out some French lingo, and fires his musket, which was the signal for such a hullaballo as I never heard afore ! Well, o' course we makes a dash at the main-chains, and a few o' our fellows gets a footing, but it proved such precious hot work, for she was well mann'd, that the first five or six got thrown bàck, dead as herrings seemingly, some with ugly pike wounds, and some with their figure-heads like mine. Howsomever, I, and about a dozen others, makes a 'rush' for it, and manages, by cutting away the boarding-nets with our cutlasses, to get aboard. Well, the last as I remembers when I gets my legs—for we had to throw ourselves aboard anyhow—was a receiving this ere 'notch' on my head. It happened this ways. I recollects quite well, as I lost my cutlass in the scramble ; and, with a large ship's pistol, I

lets fly at a young French officer—more like a gal he look'd, with long curly black hair, but wonderful active though—as come a charging down upon me with his bodkin (sword). I remembers firing, and a light flashing into my eyes, but nothing more, till I comes to in the cock-pit, some hours arterwards, just as our doctor had shook his head, and said I should soon 'lose the number o' my mess'. Well, your honour, with the loss of about eight men kill'd and twenty wounded, our people brings the prize out through a tremendous fire from the shore; and some time arter, being sent aboard with a lot o' others to take her into Plymouth, who should I see lying on her deck, with his jaws tied up, and looking woful pale, but the identical young French cove as I shot at! Well, to be sure, I did just stare like, I dare say; and so did he, for we seemed to know each other; ah, your honour, as though we had been old chums! and he ups and says

something in French to another young man as was attending on him, and this young chap says a kind o' something to me in half English and half their lingo, as did I furgive his friend, and would I shake hands ? Well, your honour, I've had a different way o' thinking o' them French chaps since then ; so I ups and tells the other chap to say as it was all fair, and o' course I furgives him, and shakes hands ; and its precious sorry I was too, a few hours arterards, to see the sail-maker a sewing of him up in his bed, for he'd slipped his cable while I was aloft parcelling some back-stays, though I was glad, too, as I was out o' the way, for the shedding o' blood aint the best thing in the world for a man's peace o' mind, your honour, though it may be done all fair, and in the heat o' action. We thinks different as we gets older, and it's many a time I've pray'd for him when I've pray'd for my own lads, which I'm sure your honour 'ull say I a'

no need to be ashamed on—God rest his soul, and forgive me.”

Assuring the old man that we considered it redounded very much more to his credit than otherwise, we bade him good-day ; promising to call again before we left Shinglebeach, and chat other matters over.

Mindful of our promise, we determined, the day before our departure for town, upon paying our old friend a visit, selecting for the occasion the evening. The afternoon had been rather stormy, a good deal of rain had fallen, heavy showers, accompanied with thunder and lightning, had cooled the air, and made it light and grateful to the sense. From the hedges and the trees, as we walked along, large drops of rain, that looked like jewels in the leaves, would every now and anon “drip,” “drip” to earth, with a degree of solemnity we thought (it was fancy, of course), with our footsteps. Here and

there a solitary insect, as though protesting at its loneliness, would "buzz," or nestling "chirp," at our approach. Afar the watch-dog bayed, and on the lea the sheep-bell tinkling, as the whistling plough-boy drove them to the fold, told that another feature in the day was done. Glowering in the west, the sun seemed threatening wind, but all so silent now, that, pausing in our walk, and listening, fancied we could even note the silence on the ear! We oftentimes muse in such like manner; we love to do so in the month of May, when Nature, redolent of her gifts, bespeaks of higher and holier things than earth. 'Tis then we ponder, as, doubtless, 'twere better if we oftener did—review our lives, our early days, the flight of that which in our boyhood, Time, used so to chafe us by its seeming slothfulness, alas! now rolling by so fast, that weeks and months, aye, and even years, seem no sooner come than gone! We were thinking much in this

strain, with little else, we trust, than a frog or so to observe our musings, when we became suddenly impressed with the object of our stroll—with our intended visit to the old man—it seemed to strike us all at once, as it were, that, would we see him again, we should hurry on; not that anything we had observed would warrant us in such a sad deduction; still, the idea seemed so to fasten itself upon us, that we determined to favour it; and, quickening our pace, soon found ourselves at his door. We were on the point of knocking for admission, when we became aware of the door being partially open, and of our worst fears being realised. In bed, surrounded by a few dear friends, lay the poor old fellow, his hands clasped apparently in prayer, while at his side a fair young creature knelt, who appeared to be repeating to him a prayer or verse. We were withdrawing on the instant, feeling that it was indeed too solemn an occasion for intrusion, when

we encountered a well-known medical man, to whom we mentioned what we had unintentionally observed, and how that we intended deferring our visit.

“ My dear sir,” he replied, “ I left old H——, some hours ago, extremely weak, and I am almost sure, if you would see him again, that you had better not delay. The young lady you saw is, indeed, a good, sweet creature ; she particularly wished to see the old man again ; she has been a good friend to him, as, indeed, she is to every one (she is the daughter of the rector here) ; and has often visited him, and cheered him with all the hope she could about his sons. I told her some time since of the state of the old man’s health, but I think it would be as well if she were to leave him now.”

Waiting until we were advised that we might enter, we saw at a glance that the sands of life were indeed low—that it was doubtful even if the old man knew that we

were present. We were leaving his side, much impressed with the hopelessness of his condition, when he suddenly showed signs of consciousness, and of a desire to speak with us.

“I’m glad you’ve come, sir; God bless you,” he said with difficulty. “I always loved you for our boys’ sake.”

At this juncture his utterance seemed forced, and his breathing short. We tried to dissuade him from talking, but he persisted, and would have raised himself on his elbow, but was too weak.

He spoke again: “I say, God bless you, sir, for me and my poor wife—God bless all—‘full and by’—steady!”

His mind then at this point must have been wandering amid the scenes of his sea life; he aroused himself, however, and by an effort wonderful for his condition, raised his hand to his head, and divesting himself of his cap, in deference, as it would seem, to his approaching fate, said,

with great earnestness, "Hark! my boys are 'hailing' me! Thank God I'm happy; I aint afeard to—" the last word seemed to fail him, his arm fell listlessly upon the bed, and he had passed away! had embarked upon that dark mysterious tide which never turns, where shot and shipwreck, sword and sorrow, are no more, where only the homeward-bound e'er sail, whose source is Mercy, and whose goal is God!





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